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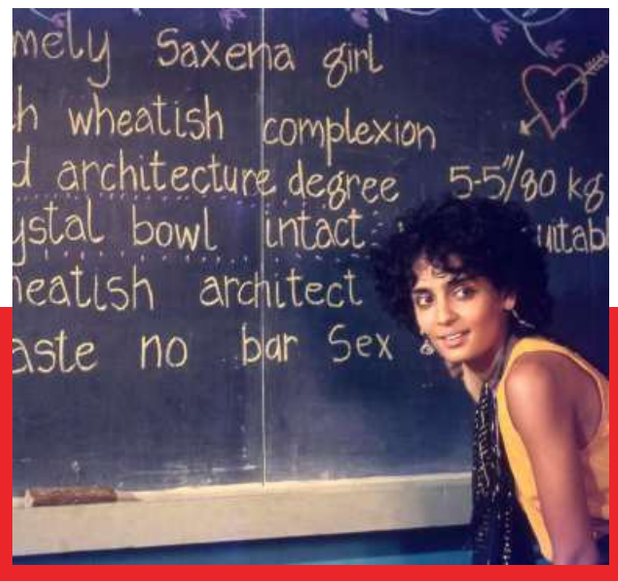

THE 'LUNATIC FRINGE' GOES TO BERLIN

After 37 years, Arundhati Roy and Pradip Krishen's film *In Which Annie Gives It Those Ones* will premiere at Berlinale Classics — underlining freer times and a disregard for homogenisation

Tanushree Ghosh
tanushree.ghosh@thehindu.co.in

In the first film she ever wrote, *In Which Annie Gives It Those Ones*, Arundhati Roy wears a red sari with a hat. I ask if the colour is political, and she responds with a laugh: "Well, yes, it's red. It's a lot of things. You can read whatever you want into it. I just love that red. The [book jacket of] *Mother Mary Comes to Me* is that red, too."

The 1989 film was perceived to be lost, barring a bad print on YouTube. But now the whimsical cult campus comedy is restored, and set for a world premiere. Roy shares, however, that she hasn't been able to rejoice because her beloved dog, Maati K. Lal, passed away last week.

Annie... will have its world premiere at Berlinale Classics in the 76th Berlin International Film Festival this month, 37 years after it was telecast (just once) on Doordarshan. Both Roy and the film's director Pradip Krishen sound bemused at the idea of a global stage for a small project. "From today's vantage point, it's quite a wacky story," Roy remarks.

The news is well-timed though, following on the heels of the Booker Prize-winning author's memoir, *Mother Mary...*, which flew off the shelves the minute it landed five months ago. "It's pure coincidence," Roy attests. Shivendra Singh Dungarpur of Film Heritage Foundation, which has restored the 16mm film in 4K resolution, adds, "We are also working on *Pakeezah, Amma Ariyan, Samskara, and Imagi Ningthem*. *Annie...* is the only one that was ready to be sent. This is the first time I have entered a film in Berlin [festival]."

The film was made for ₹12 lakh; Roy worked on all three of Krishen's films: *Massey Sahib* (1985), *Annie...*, and *Electric Moon* (1992). She also donned three roles for *Annie...*: screenplay writer, actor, and art director-cum-production designer. "We were regarded by everyone as lunatic fringe. That's a badge we wore quite proudly. Even within the new wave cinema or parallel cinema, we were the outliers," says Krishen, the filmmaker-turned-environmentalist. Roy and Krishen were married and remain great friends.

Rediscovery and restoration

In 2024, Delhi-based Krishen was moving out of the house he had lived in for 50 years. In his basement, he found six large steel trunks full of old film materials. He was going to ship them off to a *kabaadi* (scrap dealer) until a friend connected him with Dungarpur. The film's 16mm original camera negative and sound negative were at the National Film Archive of India, Pune, and the rest – a blown-up 35mm release print, digital audiotapes, shooting script, and dialogue script – travelled from Delhi to Mumbai. The negatives had perforation, emulsion damage, fading, broken splices, tears, scratches, shrinkage, mould and halos.

After hours of manual work, digital restoration and colour grading, the scans were sent to L'Immagine Ritrovata lab in Bologna for further restoration. "There was colour fading in several sections; it was also a shaky film," says Dungarpur, who had first seen the film in the early '90s as a Film Television Institute of India student. "Sound was another challenge. It had poor quality mono [single track], with significant electrical noise, distortion, gaps and many drops." But, he adds, "when you're restoring a Taj Mahal, you don't make the marble better than the ones Shah Jahan had put. You try and match the beauty".

The restoration took 18 months, and Krishen was called in for the subtitles because even though it was in English, it was idiosyncratic of the '70s student milieu [*Annie...* was set in 1974]. Roy approves of the outcome. "It hasn't been restored into some glossy tech fantasy. It's just as sort of grainy and scrappy as it's meant to be. And that's beautiful," she says.

Making of an oddball title

Arjun Raina, who played the titular role of a misguided visionary courting trouble, shares a vivid memory. "When I [his character Annie, short for Anand Grover] got slapped by actor Yuvraj Singh in the police station, the real station house officer scolded Singh, saying '*Tujhe gaal laal karna nahin aata, main karke dikhata hoon* [you can't even slap; let me show you]. Luckily, it did not require another take," says Raina, now a Melbourne-based Kathakali dancer, playwright, and an acting voice and speech coach, adding, "Annie is still giving it those ones in life."

'Giving it those ones' often implies a habitual or eccentric routine. "It was such a university thing back then. It seemed like the obvious title," Roy says, as Krishen adds, "I wanted people from Delhi University at the time to be able to recognise the title as being theirs. The original title was 'Chapter Five', because the film was about the fifth-year students at School of Planning and Architecture [SPA]. But it sounded too mundane."

Krishen remembers how while shooting on Delhi's streets, some passers-by asked what the film's name was. Knowing the full title would draw puzzled looks, the cameraman said: "*Those Ones*." Ever since then, it came to be known as *Do Jawan*, much to the makers' amusement. Its very first screening was at the Max Mueller Bhavan Delhi to a packed hall of young architecture students. "They were excited to watch this version of themselves on screen," says Krishen.

The opposite of Bollywood

Roy admits that she used to get offended because people thought it was a documentary. "Because, I suppose, it moves so easily, is so real," she says. "We were looking for people who were not beautiful or good-looking, but slightly screwed-up... looking for the opposite of Bollywood. It was even fringe to parallel cinema. The lightness comes from us not having any ambitions."

> **When I won the National Award for Best Screenplay** for *Annie...*, it was an important moment... because I was a child next to Pradip, and people were constantly taking me for his assistant. For a much younger woman to come out from under his shadows, it's not a small thing. I swam against the current. Now I punch high above my weight
>
> **ARUNDHATI ROY**
> Booker Prize-winning author and screenplay writer for *Annie...*

Some of the lines in *Annie...* stay with you through life. Goa-based production designer Aradhana Seth (*Fire*, *Earth*, *Don*), who was one of the assistant directors on the film, says each time she sees new construction with flawed orientation (for instance, beach cottages that don't face the sea), she's reminded of the film and what Yamdoot (principal Y.D. Billimoria, essayed by Roshan Seth) says to Annie when he presents his architecture project: "But my dear donkey, have you forgotten all about orientation?"

Yamdoot's character, Roy says, "was based on our principal Cyrus Jhabvala [husband of Booker Prize and Oscar-winning novelist-screenwriter Ruth Prawer Jhabvala]. People were really terrified of him. Except for me. I had no home, I had no ambition, nothing to fear. He used to like me for that. And call me 'animal' for some reason. In the film, his character calls Annie animal. Jhabvala saw the film and loved it".

In which SRK gets a cameo

Unlike parallel cinema, which zoomed into the lives of, say, a truck driver or farmer, films like *Annie...* showed the urban youth. "It was similar to the way we were living [messy hostels, student bonhomie], not a reality far removed from us but one we lived. It was made in our vocabulary," says Aradhana. "I don't remember another film like this."

Fresh out of Jamia Millia Islamia, the film was her first paid gig – as it was for the many aspiring actors in it, most of whom were coming from Barry John's TAG (Theatre Action Group). Shah Rukh Khan bagged a forgettable cameo, as the lead (the late Rituraj Singh) was already cast – and SRK "didn't come up to the mark, he didn't stand out as somebody who was a good actor", admits the director.

Actress Divya Seth (*Jab We Met, Sir, Article 370*), who was doing double shifts, parallelly working on a Doordarshan serial with filmmaker Lekh Tandon, recalls, "It was quite a magical time. We were a bunch of friends; the jokes became in-house." The way Cecil Qadir, a teacher looking at a student's project, enunciates his displeasure, "with twinkling, beady eyes, 'But this is *ho-ree-bal*!'; even today we say it like that when something is awful", Divya says with a laugh.

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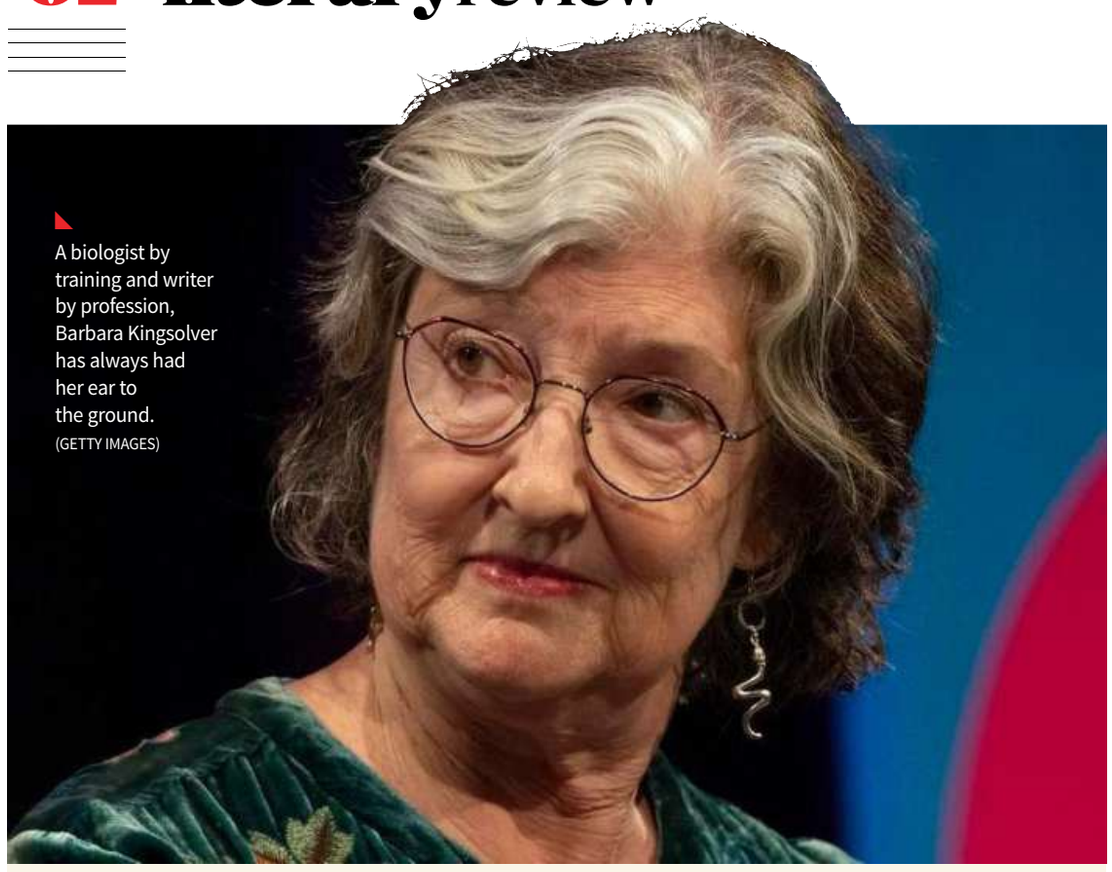
Blast from the past (Clockwise from far left) Director Pradip Krishen with film material at his Delhi home; Arundhati Roy as Radha, Arjun Raina as Annie, and Shah Rukh Khan (right) in a cameo in stills from the 1989 film; and Roy. (FILM HERITAGE FOUNDATION)

Indians at Berlinale 2026

- **Jury**: Shivendra Singh Dungarpur (international jury; Competition); Shaunak Sen (documentary award jury); Saagar Gupta (Teddy Award [LGBTQIA+ films] jury)
- **Classics:** Pradip Krishen's *In Which Annie Gives it Those Ones*
- **Forum**: R. Gowtham's *Members of a Problematic Family*, Madhushree Dutta's *Flying Tigers*
- **Forum Expanded**: Utkarsh's *A Circle as the Center of the Whole*
- **Generation Kplus**: Rima Das's *Not a Hero*, Amay Mehrishi's *Abracadabra*
- **Berlinale Talents**: Tanushree Das, Subarna Dash, Anadi Athaley, Kislay, Thanikachalam S.A., Devraj Bhoumik, Vedant Srinivas
- **Berlinale Co-Production Market**: Nihaarika Negi's *Feral*
- **South Asia programming delegate**: Anu Rangachar

CREDIT: MAYANK AUSTEN SOOFI



A biologist by training and writer by profession, Barbara Kingsolver has always had her ear to the ground. (GETTY IMAGES)

IN CONVERSATION

KINGSOLVER IN KOLKATA

The Pulitzer-winning author discusses the role of literature in cultivating compassion, writing *Demon Copperhead*, and her new book

Sudipta Datta
sudipta.datta@thehindu.co.in

We meet American writer Barbara Kingsolver under a sheltering tree at Alipore Museum (formerly a jail built by the British where many of India's political prisoners, including Jawaharlal Nehru, were incarcerated) in Kolkata. As birds chirp and leaves sway in the gentle breeze, she approves of the setting.

In the city for the Kolkata Literary Meet, Kingsolver takes in some of the sights – the Botanical Gardens and the largest flower market in Asia near Howrah Bridge and the *ghats* – to get a sense of the place. A biologist by training and writer by profession, she has always had her ear to the ground and her books reflect that.

She sensitively recast Charles Dickens' *David Copperfield* into *Demon Copperhead* (2022), in which an Appalachian boy narrates his life amid a raging opioid crisis. Like in all her novels, the story's large problems – poverty, addiction, failure of institutions – are universal themes, and struck a chord with readers. As did Demon's intrinsic values, "gentle optimism, resilience and determination", with which he faces his challenges.

Accolades followed swiftly – the Pulitzer Prize, Women's Prize for Fiction, months on *The New York Times* bestseller list, and book tours taking her far away from southern Appalachia where she lives on a farm.

Seen and heard stories

Kingsolver had been thinking about how to tell the story of the opioid crisis – "people don't want to read about orphans and poverty" – when the Eureka moment came during a stay at Bleak House in Kent, where Charles Dickens wrote *David Copperfield*. "In Dickens' office, with his manuscripts and pens lying around, I felt his spirit come to me and say, 'Look around, *David Copperfield* was a huge hit, so was *Oliver Twist*. You have to let the child tell the story'," recalls Kingsolver.

She immediately began writing in her notebook on Dickens' desk, taking *David Copperfield* as a first draft, with its "great plot and fabulous characters". Transplanting it to her place (Appalachia) and time (the present), she gave her David "a new name, red hair, fierce attitude" and made him "less apologetic, resilient, and

such a survivor". "Everybody loves a survivor story and Dickens was my way in, he opened the door," she says.

Kingsolver's first book was a work of non-fiction, *Holding the Line: Women in the Great Arizona Mine Strike of 1983*, but she struggled to find a publisher till her debut novel, *The Bean Trees* (1988), was out. During the mine strike, she was working as a journalist and sending despatches, but the protesting women touched something in her that she has never lost. "I realised that there are people who need so much to be seen, to have their stories heard, especially people who are dealing with stereotypes."

Why bad things must happen

In her novels, Kingsolver has written about the "ruthlessness of capitalism and imperialism" (*The Poisonwood Bible*, 1998); a happy marriage (*The Lacuna*, 2009); how people behave when their world is falling apart (*Unsheltered*, 2018). Her stories deal with values like compassion and empathy, respecting difference, and acknowledging some of the terrible things that have been done in the name of progress. The common thread is an attempt to "cultivate connections" which is the "first responsibility in these divisive times. Right now in my country, we have a civil war".

In that, the role of literature cannot be highlighted enough, notes Kingsolver. "Reading literature strengthens compassion. When you read fiction, you leave our own life behind and become another person, and you see the world through another point of view. By experiencing that person's reality and then coming back to yourself, you have changed; you have expanded your heart, and through that process we can change the world."

Asked if she is working on a new book, she quips: "I have such a good answer for that." Yes, a new novel, *Partita*, is expected this October. "It has a musical form; the protagonist is a musician. It's one woman's story which takes place in two phases of her life, in which she endures some catastrophes. After all, if nothing bad happens, it's not a good story, there's no conflict. I have these bad things happen to my characters, so that I can make them come back."

Besides being a writer, Kingsolver is also a pianist. But a chronic disorder, Dupuytren's disease, contracts her hands into fists and every few years, she needs surgery to straighten her hands. "My surgeon has done a very good job, so I can type and I can play the piano. But gripping anything for long advances the disease, and so I had to stop signing books." It was very hard for her but as she tells her readers, "If you let me keep my hands, I will keep writing books."

From the trenches

The author, a former war correspondent, deftly captures the adrenaline and exhaustion of frontline reporting

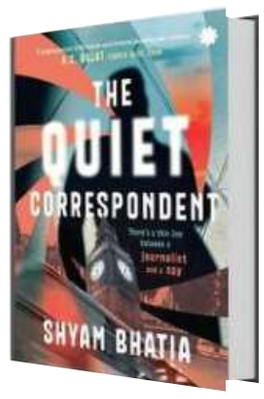
Stanley Carvalho

When Shyam Bhatia published *Bullets and Bylines* in 2016, it stood out as a fearless memoir drawn from decades of reporting in some of the world's most volatile regions. A decade later, *The Quiet Correspondent* revisits similar terrain but takes a different route. Presented as fiction, the novel is largely shaped by Bhatia's lived experience as a war correspondent, blurring the boundaries between journalism, espionage and moral reckoning.

At its core is Amol Batty, a British-Indian journalist working as the Middle East correspondent for the London-based *The Observer*. Batty's journey begins in Cairo in 1978 and unfolds against the backdrop of regional upheavals that define the late 20th century. As the novel's sub-title warns: "There's a thin line between a journalist and a spy." Batty soon discovers how porous that line can be.

From his earliest assignments, he is drawn into a shadowy world of intelligence operatives, fixers, diplomats and anonymous handlers. Encounters with Britain's intelligence services – particularly Peter Dexter and Theo, a seasoned Arabic speaker – set the tone. A seemingly well-intentioned tribute Batty writes after accompanying Theo to the Nile Delta backfires spectacularly, enraging his contact and exacting a professional and personal cost.

Batty's posting to Beirut plunges him into a city consumed by civil war. Amid bomb blasts and shifting alliances, he interviews faction leaders, files regular reports, and secures an interview with PLO chief Yasser Arafat. Bhatia deftly captures the adrenaline and exhaustion of frontline reporting, but also introduces tenderness through Batty's relationship with Layla, a Lebanese-French journalist. Their love offers brief respite from the violence – until tragedy strikes.



The Quiet Correspondent
Shyam Bhatia
Juggernaut
₹799

The journalist as pawn

In Jerusalem in 1984, the personal and political collide again. Layla's visit brings fleeting normalcy – walks, meals, shared laughter – before a bomb explodes on a bus taking her to the airport, killing her and 19 others. Batty's grief is rendered with restraint; he scatters her ashes in the Mediterranean and retreats to London, emotionally shattered.

The novel then widens its canvas. Batty's reporting takes him to Saudi Arabia, Sudan, Iran and Iraq, where he documents atrocities, chemical weapon use, and the human cost of geopolitics. In Khartoum, secret police tear up his notebook; in Tehran, shadowy intermediaries guide him to sites such as Halabja and Natanz. These episodes reinforce the book's central tension: the journalist as witness, threat and pawn.

By the early 90s, Batty is recalled to London, only to find the newsroom transformed. Foreign coverage is shrinking, access journalism is growing and stories increasingly come with strings attached – funding, favours, quiet compromises. Batty resists, and the cost is swift. Marginalised, accused, and eventually made redundant, he becomes collateral damage in a system that rewards compliance over conscience.

One of the novel's most powerful figures is Sedo Hazan, a Kurdish fixer who later reveals himself as Eli Ben-Sasson, a Kurdish Jew with links to the Mossad and other armed outfits. His final confession – about Layla's death and his efforts to protect Batty – adds moral complexity rather than neat closure. Sedo's description of Batty as a "righteous Gentile" offers the book its ethical core: integrity may not bring success, but it leaves a mark.

GETTY IMAGES

The reviewer is a Bengaluru-based independent journalist.

A pleasant buzz

Shunali Khullar Shroff's heroine is shallow yet refreshingly real, and therein lies her appeal

Preeti Zachariah
preeti.zachariah@thehindu.co.in

Exactly a year after her divorce, Nayantara, the protagonist of Shunali Khullar Shroff's new novel, *The Wrong Way Home*, is en route to the income tax department when she finds out that her ex-husband has married a much younger social media influencer. "The dust hasn't yet settled on the grave of our marriage, and he's found himself another wife?" she asks, visibly outraged. "Do people have no morals?"

Turning to social media for answers leaves her even more miserable as she encounters her "ex aboard a yacht grinning at his new bride, with the unbroken Pacific blue of honeymoon brochures in the back". The somewhat shallow, decidedly catty, and yet refreshingly real Nayantara clarifies that while she is "not jealous or anything", she isn't exactly thrilled with the news. A couple of meltdowns later, she makes a promise to herself. "He can have his perfect little wedding. I'm going to build an empire for myself."

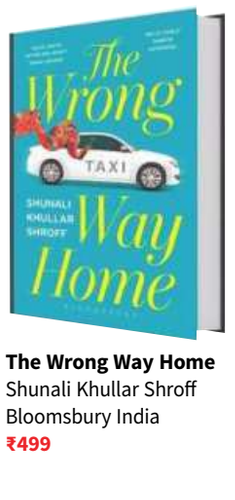
Except, of course, life never really works out like that. Nayantara continues to fumble through her days, making more than her fair share of mistakes and nurturing intensely complicated relationships with nearly everybody who forms a part of her world, including her narcissistic ex Jay, idealistic mother Kalpana, token gay bestie Rishi, a longstanding female frenemy Anjali, and some painful clients at the flailing PR agency she runs.

Mumbai to Landour

We also get a peek into her star-crossed love life, which largely falls into the all-too-familiar trope of being torn between the charming, flighty bad boy and a stolid, mummy-approved good one, a la *Bridget Jones* and its obvious inspiration, *Pride and Prejudice*.

The Wrong Way Home, like most novels in the fun, commercial fiction for women genre (often going by the sexist term 'chick lit'), is predictable enough, following familiar themes of modern love, career negotiations, family tussles and self-discovery.

While its breezy tone, relatable humour and snappy dialogue make it an easy read, it isn't a trivial novel. It tackles ideas that add unexpected depth to the narrative without weighing it down, such as the double standards with ageing, the pitfalls of personality curation, the complexity of female friendships, the social stigma of being a single woman in India, and the dynamics of toxic relationship patterns.



The Wrong Way Home
Shunali Khullar Shroff
Bloomsbury India
₹499

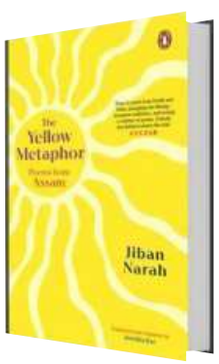
Admittedly, some peripheral characters feel caricatured at times, particularly Nayantara's love interest, the bad boy Arjun. But that is easy to forgive, given how clever and engaging the narrative is, especially in its satirical take on certain echelons of society. Also, Shroff writes places beautifully, bringing to life both the grit and glamour of Mumbai and the slow beauty of the hills in Landour.

Where the book truly shines, however, is in how skilfully Nayantara's character – infuriating, complicated, inexplicable, often unpleasant, but definitely an original – is crafted. As writer and author Namita Devidayal writes in the book's blurb, "It is not easy to like a shallow, manipulative social climber and yet... the funny, smart protagonist Nayantara is disarmingly real," she says, comparing the novel to a shot of limoncello, "light, delectable and leaving you pleasantly buzzed". I can't disagree.

BROWSER

The Yellow Metaphor

Jiban Narah, trs Anindita Kar
Penguin Eight
₹450
Born in a remote village in Assam, Narah has often spoken of the twin influences of Mishing tribal life and Assamese mainstream culture on his identity and work, with the Brahmaputra river serving as a major leitmotif in his verses. This collection brings together poems from over 30 years of Narah's career.

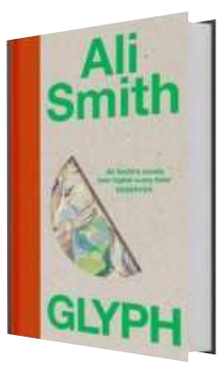


May We Feed the King

Rebecca Perry
Granta Books
₹1,650 (ebook)
In this work of historical fiction, the debut novelist recasts the story of a reluctant ruler through the eyes of a modern-day curator who dresses up historic buildings for public viewing. Perry, whose poetry has been shortlisted for the T.S. Eliot Prize, sets puzzles for the reader at every turn in this intriguing novel.

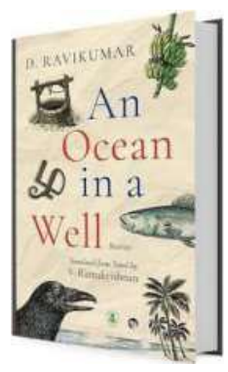
Glyph

Ali Smith
Hamish Hamilton
₹899
An anti-war novel, this book takes off from a hidden plotline in Smith's 2024 bestseller *Gliff*. Often hailed as Scotland's 'Nobel laureate-in-waiting', Smith writes unflinchingly on contemporary life, politics, environmental crises and their socio-cultural ramifications.



An Ocean in a Well: Stories

D. Ravikumar, trs V. Ramakrishnan
Speaking Tiger
₹399
The nameless characters in these 10 stories translated from Tamil reflect the realities of an increasingly divisive society. Co-founder of the anti-caste publishing house, Navayana, and a two-time MP, Ravikumar is also a poet, editor and award-winning translator.



DEATH BY STREAMING

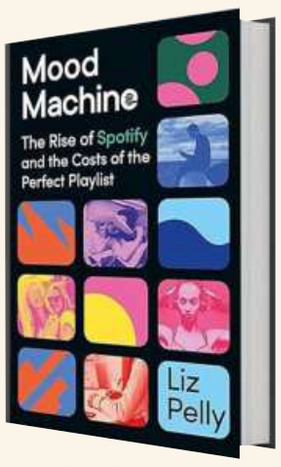
Liz Pelly takes down behemoth Spotify's practices, which she argues are killing both music and the independent artist

Aditya Mani Jha

When Spotify first started gaining serious traction as an audio streaming service in the early 2010s, its brand positioning was quite clear. The claim was that it was standing up for the little guys, the independent artists, against their oppressors i.e., major record labels such as Sony or Universal.

Those bullish on the company and other startups disrupting the entertainment industry would often use the language of 'internet evangelism' to back up their points. How algorithms 'democratise' an industry, how a 'free and fair' internet would raise the quality of democracy around the world – these were the naïve visions of techno-optimists 12-15 years ago.

But as Liz Pelly shows readers in her excellent book *Mood Machine: The Rise of Spotify and the Cost of the Perfect Playlist*, that vision was corrupted very soon, and Spotify quickly made deals with the Big Three (Sony, Universal and Warner) that consolidated their own market position. And of course, this involved hurting smaller indie labels as well as smaller musicians who produced their own tracks. A number that has often been thrown around when we talk of Spotify and musician payouts is $0.0035 – that is the estimated revenue per stream Spotify pays to an artist. Basically, one-third of a cent.



Mood Machine
Liz Pelly
Hodder and Stoughton/Hachette India
₹699

Opaque payment system

This number is supposed to be indicative of average payouts, because as Pelly explains, Spotify doesn't actually pay artists per stream. It doesn't even directly pay artists at all. Instead, Spotify makes pro rata payments every month to the record label or aggregator that's representing the artist. And because Sony, Universal and Warner make up over 70% of all recorded music, we are back to square one. The opaqueness of the payments system, as Pelly rightfully points out, is very much by design.

She writes: "The penny-fractions discourse also tells us something else: over fifteen years into the era of music streaming, most artists and listeners cannot explain how the value of a stream is calculated. The U.S. Congresswoman Rashida Tlaib estimated in 2023 that it would take over eight hundred thousand streams per month to make the equivalent of a $15/hour job. But as a representative of the United Musicians and Allied Workers (UMAW) told me in an interview, an outsized percentage of working musicians cannot accurately delineate what percentage of their income comes from streaming, simply due to the absurdly complicated nature of the system."

Mood Machine is the result of a rigorous, years-long journalistic investigation, and the author's thoroughness is visible. Especially in the book's second half, where she draws up a list of basically every corporate misdemeanour ever carried out by Spotify. And it does not make for pretty reading if you are an independent musician.

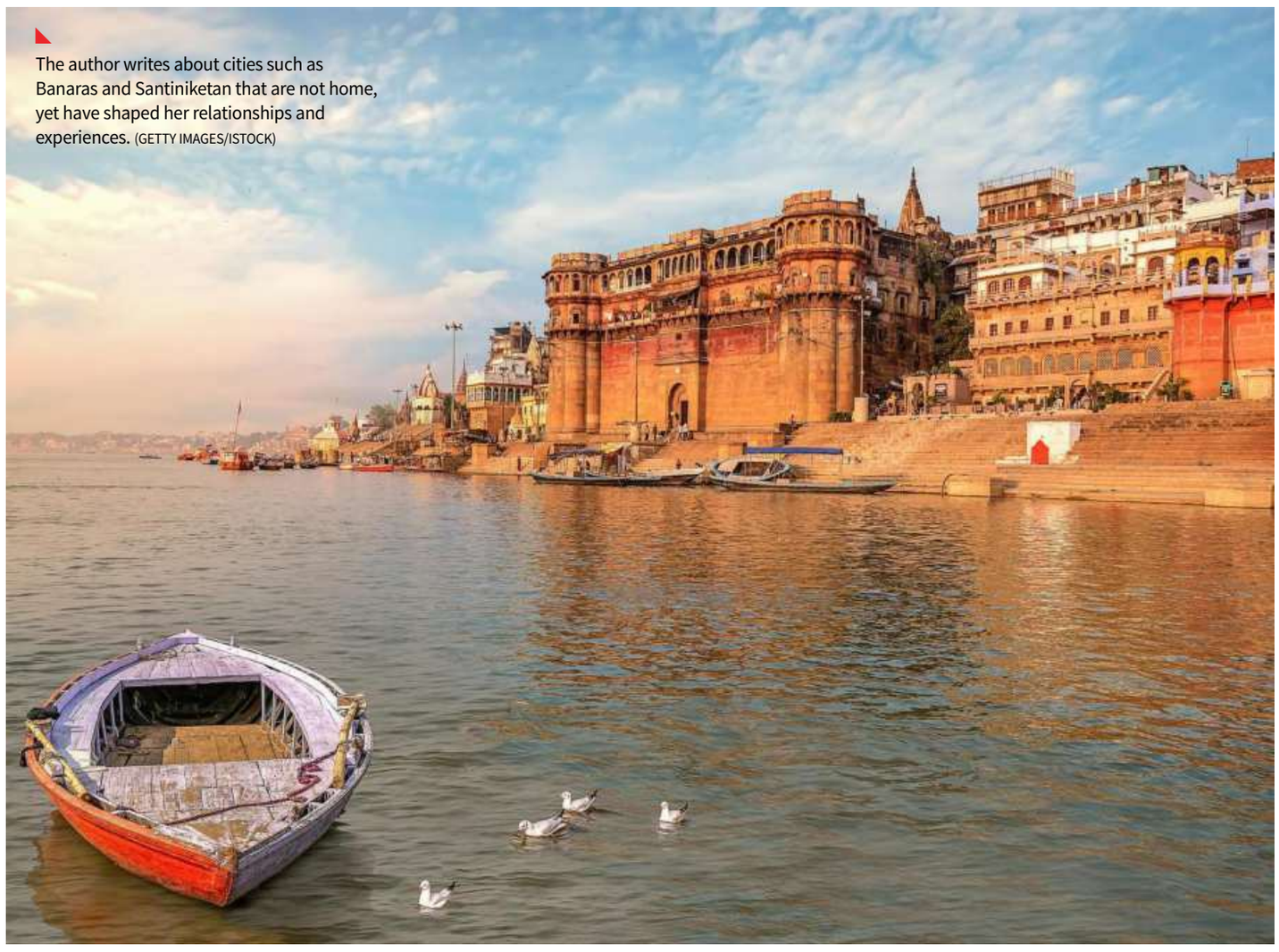
Corporate misdemeanours

"(...) playlists heavily dominated by major label acts, endless feeds of neo-Muzak loaded with ghost artists – anonymous, stock music commissioned at a discount – and a series of pay-to-play schemes. Those include the controversial Discovery Mode programme, which sells (mostly independent) artists and labels algorithmic promotion in exchange for reduced royalty rates, and frames it as an 'opportunity.' This cost-saving initiative is a move popularly regarded as a new type of payola, the term that emerged in the 1950s to describe the process of record labels making under-the-table cash payments to radio stations in exchange for airplay."

There is, of course, a deep irony in Spotify, the company that promised to put the people first when it comes to payouts and royalties, now commissioning AI-generated elevator music, the making of which involved zero human brains and zero human hands. But the pay-to-play schemes are arguably more egregious. Think about this coolly for a minute – this is a company abusing the dominance of its platform to extort small musicians and small-scale record labels, and it has somehow managed to spin this deeply cynical ploy into a kind of charity. Even Amazon, when it was caught favouring its own white-label brands in terms of search visibility, had the decency to say 'mea culpa' and try to make amends.

Mood Machine is a book about some alarming things, but it never devolves into alarmism. Instead, it calmly and systematically makes its case about Spotify and in its concluding chapters, offers case studies and market models that promise harm-reduction and maybe even a sustainable path forward. A highly recommended read for anybody curious about how audio streaming actually works.

The writer and journalist is working on his first book of non-fiction.



The author writes about cities such as Banaras and Santiniketan that are not home, yet have shaped her relationships and experiences. (GETTY IMAGES/ISTOCK)

MAPPING MEMORIES

Ananya Vajpeyi's new book is a collection of essays written over 25 years about her experience of 13 cities across the world

Radhika Santhanam
radhika.s@thehindu.co.in

Why do we love a city? Is it the beauty of its architecture – its old buildings and large domes that stand witness to the inexorable passage of time? Is it the weight of its history, the enduring legacies of its philosophers, scholars, musicians, and writers? Does it have to do with its politics, its traditions of inclusion? Or does it have to do with our own memories, which remain frozen in time and that offer the comfort of what once was?

For Ananya Vajpeyi, it is all these and much more. In *Place: Intimate Encounters with Cities*, Vajpeyi, an academic, is a writer, philosopher, thinker, and guide. Part memoir, part intellectual history, and part travel writing, this is a collection of essays written over 25 years of her experience of 13 cities across the world.

Vajpeyi is not a mere observer of the frenetic lives of city-dwellers, nor does she seek to capture the moments that define a city, as photographers do. Cities, for her, are repositories of memory; they are living archives of intellect, power, and history. Drawing from notes scribbled during her travels and stays, she writes with scholarly rigour about the ways in which the past and present of a city intersect.

Cities as home

Travel, for Vajpeyi, is "synonymous with life itself". Having lived in several cities for long stretches of time, she defines home as the cities she knows well enough – Delhi, Istanbul, and New York – where she can not only find her way

***Place* is not a typical travel book.** Bursting with ideas and observations, it often demands close attention from the reader. Written in beautiful prose, it narrates stories while offering glimpses into scholarship

but also guide others. Cities that are not home, yet have shaped her academic writing, relationships, and experiences of love and loss, also have dedicated essays. These include Venice, Chennai, Bengaluru, Banaras, Santiniketan, and Pune.

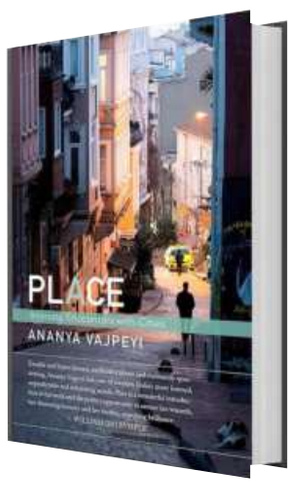
In New York, where she lived as a student, Vajpeyi dreamed of becoming a writer. But when 9/11 happened, and the city wobbled like a child learning to stand, Vajpeyi realised that New York had changed. What was lost was irretrievable, and what lay ahead was uncertain. She writes, "I had not thought death had undone so many."

Beauty and despair

In Delhi, "the crucible of Amir Khusro's poetry", she juxtaposes beauty with despair. Khusro's presence lingers in parts of Delhi and can be found by those who go in search of it. But his devotional songs lose some of their charm when performed amid thick smog, against the backdrop of a foamy river. Delhi is particularly special for Vajpeyi. It is where her parents lived with their dogs, and it is where she keeps returning despite political majoritarianism, environmental hazards, and the overwhelming fog of grief. It is also where she realises that a world she knew ended with the death of her parents, but where she also learned "new ways of inhabiting" the city.

Vajpeyi's "principal window into Turkey" is the writer, Orhan Pamuk. Absorbed in his works, she finds her way across Istanbul, walking endlessly, taking in views from the Bosphorus, sitting in cafes and watching cats, and listening to the "singsong call of the vendor". In Istanbul, "the familiar was unfamiliar. The unfamiliar was familiar", she writes. "I was at home, abroad."

The most beautiful essays are those where the memoiristic element is strongest. In one of them, she recounts her father's delightful meeting with the playwright Samuel Beckett, and her own conversations with the philosopher Giorgio Agamben. What struck me most was how these reveal a desire, even among poets and scholars, to seek out those they admire, inspired by curiosity and the joy of widening their intellectual horizons.



Place: Intimate Encounters with Cities
Ananya Vajpeyi
Women Unlimited Ink
₹625

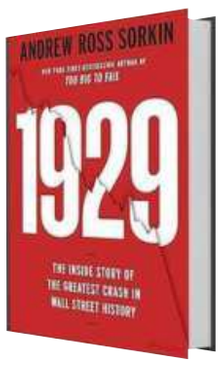
Wandering in Santiniketan

In another, Vajpeyi looks back at her time in Santiniketan, at that precise moment when she spoke to her father for the last time, in vivid, excruciating detail. In this town, the home of the Tagores, Jamini Roy, Amartya Sen and others. In this town, where the spirit of Rabindranath Tagore, "overflowing with creativity, its wellsprings still not dry after a century and a half", lingers, she finds herself perpetually wonder-struck. In yet another essay on Banaras, where she let go of her mother's mortal remains, she writes evocatively about her parents' love for each other.

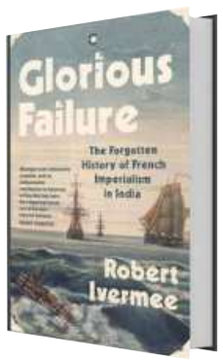
Place is not a typical travel book. Bursting with ideas and observations, it often demands close attention from the reader. But while measured and quietly reflective, it also has a tendency to meander. You may find yourself lost in a maze of names. Or be immersed in a section, only to be abruptly carried into another. In a work where the personal and political intersect, the inclusion of a lone fictitious chapter is a puzzling choice. And while the postscripts on Gaza convey a sense of helplessness and urgency, they often feel disconnected from the rest of the essays.

But this otherwise well-wrought work stayed with me long after the final page. *Place* narrates stories while offering glimpses into scholarship; it gives attention as much as it seeks it. With achingly beautiful prose, deep empathy, and layers that reveal themselves anew, it is deserving of a place on your bookshelf – to savour, not rush through, more than just once.

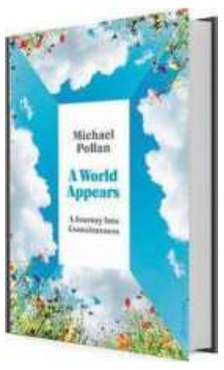
1929: The Inside Story of the Greatest Crash in Wall Street History
Andrew Ross Sorkin
Allen Lane
₹613 (Kindle)
With access to historical records and newly uncovered documents, Sorkin takes readers into the chaos that unfolded as the Wall Street bull market went into a freefall in 1929. It's a story about power and "disregarded alarm bells".



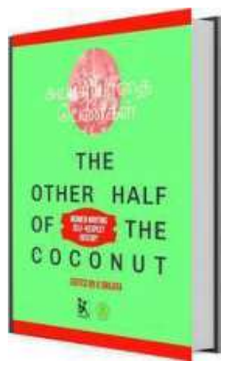
Glorious Failure: The Forgotten History of French Imperialism in India
Robert Ivermee
Westland Books
₹699
A historian tells the story of France's aggressive, but doomed, imperial project in India. Spanning 150 years, he busts the idea of French imperialism in the country being a benign presence.



A World Appears: A Journey into Consciousness
Michael Pollan
Penguin
₹1,099
Pollan traces unmapped consciousness from different perspectives — scientific, philosophical, and more — to see what each has in store for humans. He tries to find neural explanations for felt reality, and discovers cutting-edge advances in the field.



The Other Half of the Coconut: Women Writing Self-Respect History
Ed. K. Srilata
Zubaan
₹525
The Self-Respect Movement, started by Periyar, had many women whose contributions have gone largely unnoticed. This collection, translated from the Tamil, could serve as the basis for writing an alternative history of the movement.



THE 'LUNATIC FRINGE' GOES TO BERLIN

CONTINUED FROM
» PAGE 1

Lingua franca of freedom

In 1987, Roy and Krishen's big project, the historical period piece *Bargad*, which they had been working on for years, "had gone down the tubes", says Roy. Then they'd heard that Doordarshan was funding small films. "I wanted to write about what I knew, not about things that were unfamiliar or research based," she adds. "Like I said in the book [*Mother Mary...*], for me, the school of architecture was a radical liberation from a pretty troubled space that I came from. It represented radical freedom to me and I wanted to write about that – and the freedom involved a lack of ambition, having no money."

Roy remembers how she and a friend carried a college mate's favourite moped in the lift up to the fifth floor and parked it at his desk. "It was almost ridiculous to be wealthy, have all that stuff and to show off. The more ragged we were, the more respected. That's why I keep saying, *Annie...* is a stance," Roy says. "Obviously, I was not writing about the most deprived sections of society, but it was still not high privilege. There was such a diversity of students, a diversity of kinds of English. We were all from places [the Northeast, Odisha, Bengal, Kerala] where the only language we had in common was English."

Krishen and Roy worked hard to give it the kind of language and subculture they had both grown up in, 10 years apart, in Delhi University. "We spoke a very specific kind of English that was also very funny and beautiful," Roy says. "For me, it was so important to celebrate it, because most people in those days would make fun of Indian English."

It's an idea that's relevant today too, when Gen Z lingo is getting a lot of attention. "Among the younger demographics, language games are always more agile and nimble. Every generation has its own slant and purchase on English, like how we instrumentalise, appropriate and wield our own versions of it," says Oscar-nominated documentary filmmaker Shaunak Sen (*All that Breathes*), who has tasted varying registers of English assimilation at Delhi University, Jamia Millia Islamia and Jawaharlal Nehru University.

Sen adds that from today's vantage point, *Annie...* will feel like an ephemeral, transient moment. "But that's the job of good pieces of cinema – they're able to pin down things authentically, articulate the linguistic zeitgeist, and eschew any kind of homogenisation, let alone linguistics."

Cinema that resists

Roy writes in her memoir, "Nobody could have been more shocked than Pradip and me when *Annie...* won two National Awards, one for Best Screenplay and the other, my favourite award of all time, 'Best Film in Languages Other Than Those Specified in Schedule VIII of the Indian Constitution'. A very *Annie* award."

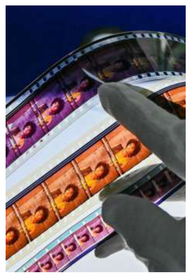
She calls the awards a "sweet revenge". Roy adds, "If I were to tell the truth, when I won that Best Screenplay award for *Annie*, it was an important moment, not because of the award as such, but because I was a child next to Pradip. And people [men, mostly] were constantly taking me for his assistant, asking me to write but not demand credit. For a much younger woman to come out from under his shadows, it's not a small thing. I swam against the current. Now I punch high above my weight. It's heads of state, not mothers and lovers."

In 2015, after Mohammed Akhlaq, 52, was lynched by a mob in Uttar Pradesh, Roy and Krishen returned their National Awards.

Can an unfiltered film like *Annie...* be made today? "I don't think anything is impossible. But I think everything has become so contentious, the air is so charged, and so it's not easy at all to make space for this kind of gentle, defeated young people, not taking themselves seriously, not well dressed, the opposite of what happens today," Roy says, "Today, everything is negotiated with a hammer. There was an easiness then, which is now a rare thing. It's very hard to maintain that lightness of touch. But I feel, it is incumbent on us as writers and filmmakers to claim it. We can't just keep blaming the system. We also have to do our work and make the space."

Film scholar-historian Amrit Gangar adds that in our culturally vibrant country, "there are always voices of 'resistance' – open or hidden, eloquent or quiet. That niche has to be created by an imaginative mind".

It would gladden Krishen's heart, who rues that none of his films has been commercially released in Indian cinemas, to know that *Annie...* will release in theatres in March (13-15), as Dungarpur lets on.



Come together (Clockwise from above, left) Pre- and post-restoration film stills, with the late Rituraj Singh; a behind-the-scenes still with director Pradip Krishen (extreme right) and AD Aradhana Seth with the clapperboard; the film's negatives of Arundhati Roy; and Roy. (FILM HERITAGE FOUNDATION)

Limited channels of release

In the 1970s and '80s, the country was at the forefront of the parallel cinema renaissance — whether through the NFDC (National Film Development Corporation), which produced Krishen's *Massey Sahib*, or Doordarshan (*Annie...*). "That space has shrunk now; the overall ecosystem is broken," says filmmaker Kanu Behl (*Titli*, *Agra*).

Gangar notes that when multiplexes started in India in 1997, "independent filmmakers thought their films would get theatrically released. It never happened, save for rare cases [Madhusree Dutta's *7 Islands and a Metro* (2006), Paresh Kamdar's *Khargos* (2009), Rajat Kapoor's *Ankhon Dekhi* (2013)]."

According to Sen, "The initial promise and euphoria around streamers is dead in India. Now, with lack of infra-structure, international co-productions are becoming important because the indie circuit is still figuring out how to fund smaller films."

CREDIT: MAYANK AUSTEN SOOFI

CAVIAR, WITH CAVEATS

The new EU-India Free Trade Agreement is on track, but don't break out the vintage bubbly just yet

Magandeep Singh

Did you ever hear the story of the axe that told the trees he is their friend because he too is made of wood? Every time I hear the ether rife with news of soon-to-be-reduced tariffs, and no matter how meaty they sound, I am reminded of this phrase.

They say one lifetime isn't enough for India, but I feel I've lived here long enough to look optimism straight between the brows and constantly doubt it. That said, the notion that the winds from the West carry news of change – and a change for the positive, as one is given to surmise – gives one little reason to be completely crestfallen.

But, don't break out the vintage bubbly just yet. Before you can sit in a somewhat-modestly-priced European luxury sedan, sipping something precious from a village that Romans ruled 2,000 years ago, all while you casually flick your fancy timepiece, which now only costs as much as a 2BHK with an open parking slot (down from a 4BHK with a covered parking), a lot has to fall in place.

Since food and drink is what I mostly understand, those are what I am sharing my takeaways from. Well, it's mostly drink. Okay, it's alcohol. Now, allow me to burst the bubble systematically.

1. Negotiations have ended, the treaty is yet to be signed. Even a divorce has a six-month cool-down before it is finalised. This marriage has 27 members on one side and specific requirements from each state are yet to be filled in. This could easily take a year to be signed before implementation and roll-out can be discussed.

2. Importers in India are holding enough backstocks to last them for a while. Even if they sell it all off before the treaty comes into play, it will then be hotels, restaurants and retail shop owners sitting with that stock. Considering how hotels and restaurants aren't exactly the beacon of benevolence – they are for-profit business entities – don't expect them to (a) sell the expensive stock at lower rates at a loss, nor (b) receive the benefits from new reduced rates and simply "pass it all forward".

3. India still has regulatory bans on certain foods such as non-pasteurised milk cheeses and foie gras, among a few others. So, even a lowering of duties won't facilitate their entry into India.

4. Duties vs. taxes: Many fail to realise that alcohol is a state subject, which means even with reduced custom duties, state taxes can still cripple the market. Add to this the requirements of FSSAI compliance, lab tests, specially-printed back labels, packaging compliances, and high VAT (25% on alcohol in the capital) and you will still feel heady sans booze when the bill comes.

5. Duties vs. cess: As has happened before, when a customs duty falls, a new cess is brought on and appended to the bill of fare. What this means is that the duty drop is purely ornamental with no real benefit as the dues owed to the administration remain largely unchanged. For those interested, there is a 10% social welfare surcharge on the import of caviar, on top of the existing custom levies, because nothing says social welfare like caviar. Chocolates already have a 10% surcharge besides the 18% GST, so even after a fall in prices, they may still cost around 50% more than in Europe.

6. With cars, it is mostly the CBU (completely built unit) models that will benefit from the tax reduction. For the ignorant many, CBU sedans and SUVs are rarely in the common man's budget, just like a steep price drop on the Burj Khalifa penthouse won't suddenly make the average Indian migrate from his suburban flat. If anything, you will feel poorer for still being unable to afford a car in spite of the ₹1.5 crore price reduction.

7. Like with Australia, the tariff reduction for most products will be staggered, mostly over a decade. Which means, those unbelievably rock-bottom prices that are being touted as the final denomination won't arrive till you have exhausted every drop in your cabinet, turned over a new leaf, and earned your five-year sobriety coin.

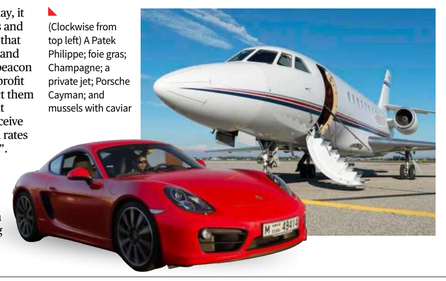
8. Falling tariffs will not raise your purchasing parity. It is largely making things affordable that were already affordable and often a smartly positioned tax write-off for the famously rich and fabulous. Most of this will benefit the 'Already-Haves', not the 'Have-Nots'. Simply put, when gold is surging to ₹17,000 for a gram and the dollar-rupee relationship is doing a reverse free fall, broke will continue to remain broke.

9. But, not all is kosher in paradise because private jets won't get any cheaper. So, there is that for us commoners to rejoice about, sticking it back to the Scrooges!

Overall, if this hasn't dampened your spirits, then you were definitely already soaked in something special when you started reading this piece. To sum up: is a reduction in tariffs good? Yes. Will we reap the benefits of it soon? Not really. But, hopefully, soon enough. Will everyone stand to gain? Well, depends on what your monthly Champagne, Cabaret and caviar budget was earlier. That said, pet foods, cars and perhaps watches will reflect the change sooner than comestibles. So, maybe shift your priorities: drink slow, drive sexy, and maybe get a dog.

As for the powers that be, learn from the online platforms and luxury boutiques that go on sale for absolutely no reason every month, but are crafty enough to put a small asterisk against the heading and follow it up with a small print buried at the bottom somewhere which un-poetically reads, "Conditions will apply."

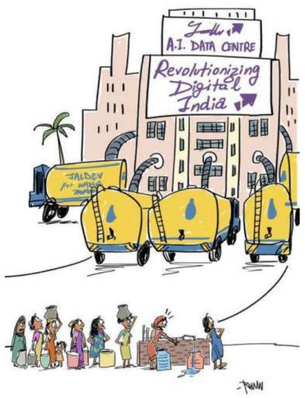
The writer is a sommelier, and a lifestyle and luxury columnist.



(Clockwise from top left) A Patek Philippe; foie gras; Champagne; a private jet; Porsche Cayman; and mussels with caviar

GREEN HUMOUR

Rohan Chakravarty



MEET REBLE: INDIA'S RISING RAP STAR

The young artist from Meghalaya, who delivered hits in recent blockbusters *Lokah* and *Dhurandhar*, on redefining the Indian cinema soundscape

Anurag Tagat

Meghalaya-born Daiaphi Lamare, better known as rapper Reble, released the single 'New Riot' last October. Produced by Kerala beatsmith Parimal Shais and featuring a nu-metal edge delivered by guitarist Krishn M. Sujith, the slick, goth and industrial-aesthetic music video (featuring MMA fighters, dancers, black goop dripping from Reble's eyes) recently hit a million views on YouTube. Looking back, Reble says over the phone from Guwahati, where she is now based, "Obviously, it was an easy pick, to choose music, because I didn't want to do a 9-to-5 job."

The 24-year-old, who finished her civil engineering course in Bengaluru last year (and rapped for the promo song of Malayalam hit *Lokah Chapter 1: Chandra* in August), released her music via Homegrown Records, which has a partnership with the globally renowned Atlantic Records, home to the likes of Coldplay, Ed Sheeran and Cardi B. In December, she had three songs on the blockbuster soundtrack to *Dhurandhar*, composed by Shashwat Sachdev.

Originally intending to have her just on 'Move' (which adapts Mohammed Rafi's peppy 'Yeh Ishq Ishq' from 1968), which went into the movie trailer, Sachdev found Reble's fast-paced, no-holds-barred English rap suited more songs, leading to 'Run Down The City - Monica', adapted from R.D. Burman's zingy 1971 number 'Piya Tu Ab Toh Aaja', and later the original composition 'Naal Nachna'.

All three songs – much like the full soundtrack of the Bollywood actioner – took off, with people surprised at how well a Gen Z rapper could fit alongside a classic voice like Sonu Nigam on 'Move'. "It's an introduction for people to this rap thing, because otherwise, Bollywood songs have this typical soundscape," she says, adding that the soundtrack also had fellow rappers Hanumankind and Tsumyoki, perhaps exposing Bollywood music fans to English rap from India for the first time.

Many moods Reble is a live-wire on stage, projecting various personas and alter-egos in her performances. (SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT)

I take all that rage, anger, stress... everything, and just project it into something more positive. There's a lot of ways to vent, one way is to just make music

Collabs, home and away

Having followed Reble's rap from her very first releases – with Shillong artists such as D-Mon from seasoned hip-hop act *Khasi Bloodz* – it's safe to say that the artist from Nangbah in the West Jaintia Hills had her mind set on music from the very start. Shillong and other cities in Meghalaya have often gravitated towards English music, like most of the Northeast. There is a familiarity with everything from Red Hot Chili Peppers to Linkin Park and Weezer, and Reble credits her taste in music to friends and family alike.

Rapping from the age of 10, inspired by American heavyweights such as André 3000 from OutKast, Notorious B.I.G. and Eminem, she started off with the moniker Daya in 2018, and by 2019, became Reble. "At the time, I didn't want my family to find out that I was doing music, so I decided to change my name. I genuinely thought that if I used a different name, they wouldn't figure it out," she once told *Gulf News* in an interview.

Her early songs such as 'BAD' (2019) pulsed with rage about growing up in a dysfunctional home, but then later numbers like 'Believe' brimmed with positive energy, with lines going: *Ma, I promise I'ma make it/ Trust me, someday I'll be touring places*.

In the last year or so, Reble has hit up all the big stages in India – Spotify Rap91 Live in Mumbai, Boiler Room in Gurugram, Cherry Blossom Festival in Shillong. Up next is the inaugural edition of UN40: Music & Beyond festival in Bengaluru next month. In December, she travelled for her first international shows: XP Music Futures conference and showcase festival in Riyadh and Sole DXB in Dubai.

She's had brands lining up for collaboration, but has also been teaming up independently with artists such as Ranchi hip-hopper Tre Ess ('Opening Act' and 'Terror'), Shillong musician Kim The Beloved ('Set It Off') and Ahmedabad maverick Dhanji and producer Clifr ('Only Uparwala Can Judge Me'). "I think since last year, a lot of things started happening very rapidly. And I think it happened way before I could even process it," she says.

More singles in 2026

While early material had Reble doing a bit of soulful singing as well, the latest single 'New Riot' goes all out, inspired by bands like Deftones. She laughs about how she's drawn to heavier music and points to how the Indian metal community has "the nicest people" because "all the rage is let out through the music". She explains, "For me, it's the same. I take all that rage, anger, stress... everything, and just project it into something more positive. There's a lot of ways to vent, one way is to make music."

A live-wire on stage, projecting various personas and alter-egos, it might surprise some to know that Reble is an unassuming person off stage. "When you meet [me in] person, it's like everything combined, so then it becomes a very different experience. I think it does give people a bit of a shock," she says with a laugh.

After *Dhurandhar*, many musicophiles are hoping for a Reble-Hanumankind collaboration. Reble did support the 'Big Dawgs' hitmaker at his Bengaluru show in 2023 and is all praise for the doors he has opened for English rap from India on the global stage. "We meet here and there, I see him every once in a while, and he's always been very supportive. But apart from that, I don't think I look too much into how and what he's doing, because I think every journey is very unique, and there's no absolute formula for any artist," she says.

Reble is positive that she's "going to have a different path" but is glad for the "confirmation" that comes with Hanumankind's global breakout. With *Dhurandhar* and *Lokah* behind her, there are potential film songs in the offing, but Reble is not signing on just for the clout and reach that the Indian film music space provides. "I really want to like what I'm doing. I think 2026 is going to have a lot of singles," she signs off.

The writer is a Bengaluru-based independent music journalist.

GETTY IMAGES

ALLEGEDLY

The Board of Friendship is here

My inbox is flooded with applications from well-known oligarchs, crony capitalists and *crorepati* politicians

I am delighted to announce I'm starting a new Board for people who didn't get invited to Donald Trump's Board of Peace. You don't even have to be a Prime Minister or President to get in, though heads of state are also welcome to apply.

I got the idea when I was in Davos, watching Trump sign the Charter for his Board. I knew he had invited only about 60 people. This made no sense to me, given that India alone has 1.48 billion people, of whom only one got an invite. My heart went out to the millions out there who also want to be Board members, sit in Boardrooms, and be able to tell their friends, "I'll talk to you later. I have a Board meeting to attend."

But there simply aren't enough boards to accommodate the aspirations of all of them. Take me, for instance. I am such an illustrious personality. Anyone who glimpses my distinguished visage would automatically assume I must be on the boards of at least a dozen Fortune 500 companies. Believe it or not – I am not. So I know exactly how most of you feel. As I pondered this crisis of too many people and too few boards, it struck me that this demand-supply gap presented a great opportunity. That's when I decided to launch my own Board.

A noble mission

Initially I didn't know what to call my Board. I really love peace. But it was already taken by Trump. I thought of calling it 'Board of Harmony'. But a friend who is a copy editor pointed out 'harmony' sounded too much like 'peace'. I didn't want my Board to be a 'me too' version of Trump's.

At the same time, I also didn't want it to be too narrow in its ambit. So I was about to go with 'Board of Everything Everywhere All At Once'. But my lawyer said that too was taken. Apparently someone had named their movie *Everything Everywhere All At Once*. How ridiculous! But it's true.

Then last week, during the Parent-Teacher Meeting at Kattabomman's school, I overheard one parent tell another that her son was becoming a loner, struggling to make friends. That was my Eureka moment. Who isn't lonely these days? Who doesn't need friends? I immediately stood up to go register my Board of Friendship. Then I immediately sat down. I remembered this was Digital India, where all registrations are done online.

I want to make it clear that my Board is a purely philanthropic initiative. Its mission is to promote friendship by giving people an opportunity to escape their loneliness and feel important at the same time by attending Board meetings. Naturally, to accomplish this noble mission, it needs funds, which is where you come in.

Something for all

Unlike Trump's Board, whose membership is invitation-only, my Board is open to anyone who wants to join. And yes, I am currently accepting new members.

The process to join the Board of Friendship is simple. Interested candidates should download the application form from the website, print it out, fill it, and send it to me along with three recommendation letters, and a modest (non-refundable) admission fee of $100 million – a special $900 million discount (inaugural offer only) on what Trump is charging for permanent membership of his Board.

Once their payments come through, successful applicants will receive a physical copy of the Board of Friendship Charter which they need to sign and courier back to me in triplicate, along with a short video of themselves bending the knee in front of my photograph.

Needless to say, as the President, Vice-President and Chairman-for-life of the Board of Friendship, I have the power to expel any Board member at any time. Violating the Charter will be grounds for immediate expulsion. Unlike Trump's verbose Charter, mine only has three articles:

Article 1: No one contradicts the Chairman.

Article 2: Chairman is always right.

Article 3: No one asks questions except the Chairman.

I am happy to report that my inbox is already flooded with applications – not only from well-known oligarchs, crony capitalists and *crorepati* politicians who can afford the membership fee but also from regular folk.

To cater exclusively to ordinary Indians who can't afford my Board of Friendship, I intend to convene two more Boards: Board of Poverty and Board of Unemployment. Both are widely practised in India. My friends, however, are warning me these won't take off. We'll find out, won't we?

G. Sampath, the author of this satire, is Social Affairs Editor, The Hindu.

TRICKTIONARY EPISODE 25

HELLO, ARE YOU THERE?

A cautionary tale for anyone who has ever been told 'Just WhatsApp me', and believed it

GETTY IMAGES/ ISTOCK

Dear reader, some days ago, this writer, no doubt your favourite writer, went into town with a massive box full of books. I was on my way to the library. Some of you youths reading this article maybe not be familiar with the concept of a library. A library is a place where you can go and borrow objects called books.

Now, how do I explain books to you? Imagine you are reading a website on the Internet. Now imagine that you took a printer and printed all the pages of the website. And then you took all of these prints and stitched them together so that you can carry them around easily. Now you can read your website even if the Internet connection has failed, or there is a power cut.

This is called a 'book'. If you are still unclear, please ask any relative above the age of 40. A library is a place where you can go and borrow 'books' for a limited period of time. You pay a fee for this service.

I went to the library, returned all my books, and then borrowed some new ones. Including a number of crime novels by Ellis Peters, featuring the wonderful Brother Cadfael, a crime-solving, conundrum-untangling, criminal-outwitting Benedictine monk who lives in 12th century England. They are quite wonderful.

On my way back, I stopped at a café for some comestibles. When I suddenly spotted, standing at the opposite end of the café, an old friend from Bengaluru. I had not met this person in several years. And I was very pleasantly surprised. Many years ago, he used to work in a software company. But today, he is some investment type.

Our eyes met and we ran towards each in other slow motion. The next 45 minutes was a whirlwind of memories and updates and anecdotes. I had a wonderful time. Just before parting ways, I asked him to give me his email address or some such so that we can stay in touch.

Texterminator
/tɛkˈstɜːmɪneɪtə/

noun
Definition: A person who insists they are instantly reachable via messaging apps and promises immediate responses, yet systematically ignores all messages, effectively terminating any hope of actual communication.
Related forms:
Texterminate (*verb*): To promise instant availability while systematically ignoring all messages

And it was at that moment, dear reader, that this fellow became the subject of this fortnightly update.

He said: "Sidin, there is absolutely no need for email. My entire life is fully run on WhatsApp! Just send me a WhatsApp message and I will respond immediately."

You use WhatsApp for everything, I asked, hiding my deep suspicion under my sparkling personality.

He said yes. Apparently his whole company uses WhatsApp to do all their work. And so do his wife and children. And also his parents. And all the other people in his housing complex. And his driver, his maid, his cook, yoga instructor, chartered accountant, doctor, dentist, and even his local *kirana* store fellow.

He even opened his phone and showed me one recent WhatsApp conversation with someone who had applied to his company for a job.

"Sidin, I even interview people on WhatsApp."

This is when I noticed that he had just under 4,000 unread messages on his WhatsApp.

We then exchanged our WhatsApp contacts and bid farewell. On the way back home, I sent my friend a WhatsApp message: "So nice to meet you after all these years. Please stay in touch."

Readers, one of the great ironies of modern existence is that despite all these innovations like WhatsApp and Instagram and MySpace and so on, people have never been worse at being in touch.

And the worst culprit is WhatsApp. The moment somebody tells me "Just send me a message on WhatsApp, I will revert forthwith," I know immediately that they will vanish from my life, never to be seen again, just like that Malaysian Airlines flight.

Friends, we have created a monster. WhatsApp was supposed to make communication easier. Instead it has given birth to a new species of human being who is simultaneously hyper-connected and completely unreachable.

This is why it is imminent upon this writer to coin a word that describes these reprobates. And that word is: texterminator.

Example sentence: "After Priya gave me her number saying 'Just WhatsApp me, I'm always on my phone', the texterminator proceeded to leave my message unread for six months while posting Instagram stories every three hours."

Have you been texterminated recently? Perhaps, it was a dentist? Send an email, telegram or fax urgently.

Sidin Vadukut helps early stage companies communicate better. He blogs at www.whatay.com.

GOREN BRIDGE

Tommy would be proud

North-South vulnerable, South deals

Bob Jones

North's four-diamond bid would not be everyone's choice, but it led to a good slam contract. South was Patryk Patreuha, from Poland.

South won the opening spade lead with dummy's ace and led the king of clubs. West won with the ace and led another spade to dummy's king. South cashed the queen of diamonds, feeling pretty good about things, and was sick when West showed out. South did not give up. He cashed the queen of clubs, discarding a heart from his hand, and ruffed a club. He cashed his queen of spades, shedding a low heart from dummy, then cashed the ace of hearts and ruffed a heart. This was the position, with the lead in dummy [grid, far right]:

South led a club from dummy and over-ruffed

	NORTH ♠ A K ♡ Q 4 ◇ Q J 6 ♣ K Q 10 9 4 3	
WEST ♠ 10 9 8 5 4 ♡ K 9 7 5 3 ◇ Void ♣ A J 6		EAST ♠ 6 3 2 ♡ 10 8 ◇ 10 9 7 5 2 ♣ 8 7 5
	SOUTH ♠ Q J 7 ♡ A J 6 2 ◇ A K 8 4 3 ♣ 2	

The bidding:

SOUTH	WEST	NORTH	EAST
1◇	2◇*	3♣	Pass
3NT	Pass	4◇	Pass
4♡	Pass	4♠	Pass
4NT	Pass	5◇	Pass
6◇	All pass		

*Both majors, at least 5-5

Opening lead: 10 of ♠

East's nine of diamonds with the ace. He ruffed his heart with dummy's jack of trumps and led another club. He picked up East's last two trumps with a trump coup. Beautifully done!

	NORTH ♠ Void ♡ Void ◇ J ♣ 10 9 4	
WEST ♠ 9 8 ♡ K 9 ◇ Void ♣ Void		EAST ♠ Void ♡ Void ◇ 10 9 7 5 ♣ Void
	SOUTH ♠ Void ♡ J ◇ A K 8 ♣ Void	

QUIZ

Easy like Sunday morning

Happy birthday!

Berty Ashley

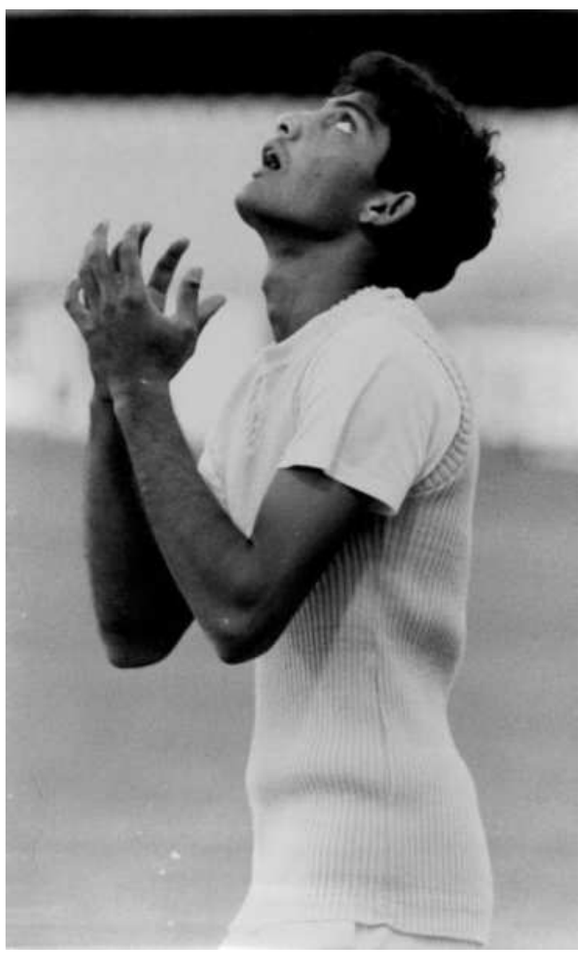
1 Born on February 8, 1700, Daniel Bernoulli was a Dutch scientist who worked across mathematics and physics. He is most well-known for a key concept in fluid dynamics named after him. It is used to calculate the pressure difference between the upper and lower parts of an aircraft. What important result does this give us?

2 Born on February 8, 1828, this French author was responsible for some of the most iconic science fiction books for children. His adventure stories predicted amazing journeys under the seas and around the world. Who was this author popular in all school libraries?

3 Born on February 8, 1834, Dmitri grew up to work as a chemistry teacher. While writing a textbook, he had a dream in which a table began to fall into place on its own. This led him to create an extraordinary concept, which we use unchanged to this day.

4 Born on February 8, 1906, Chester Carlson was an American physicist who invented electrography and combined electrostatic printing with photography. The latter was called '___graphy', which meant 'dry writing'. The first machine just added an 'x' to the word, and to date is the most famous of its kind. Fill in the blank.

5 Born on February 8, 1914, Bill Finger was an American author who was part of a small studio with Bob Kane, who had an idea for a superhero character. Bill suggested adding a cowl with pointy ears, a cape instead of wings and changing the black and red style to black and grey. This was the birth of which iconic character?



This Indian cricketer is considered one of the best ODI batsmen of his era. (GETTY IMAGES)

6 Born on February 8, 1932, this American pianist and conductor is behind some of the most iconic pieces of music in film history. He has won 27 Grammy Awards and been nominated for 54 Oscar Awards, including one at age 91. Who is this legendary musician whose work you have definitely heard somewhere?

7 Born on February 8, 1941, this Punjabi singer was iconic in Hindustani classical music. He was responsible for popularising the 'Ghazal' form of poetry and was known for his *Bol-pradhan* style of emphasis on words. Who was this icon whose works spanned more than five decades?

8 Born on February 8, 1955, this American lawyer is known for his legal thriller books. His books have been adapted into multiple movies, starring the biggest Hollywood stars. Who is the author of *The Firm*, *The Pelican Brief* and *The Chamber*?

9 Born on February 8, 1963, this Indian cricketer is considered one of the best ODI batsmen of his era. He captained the Indian team in a record three World Cups and a memorable 1995 Asia Cup win. Who is this cricketer who is currently a minister in Telangana government?

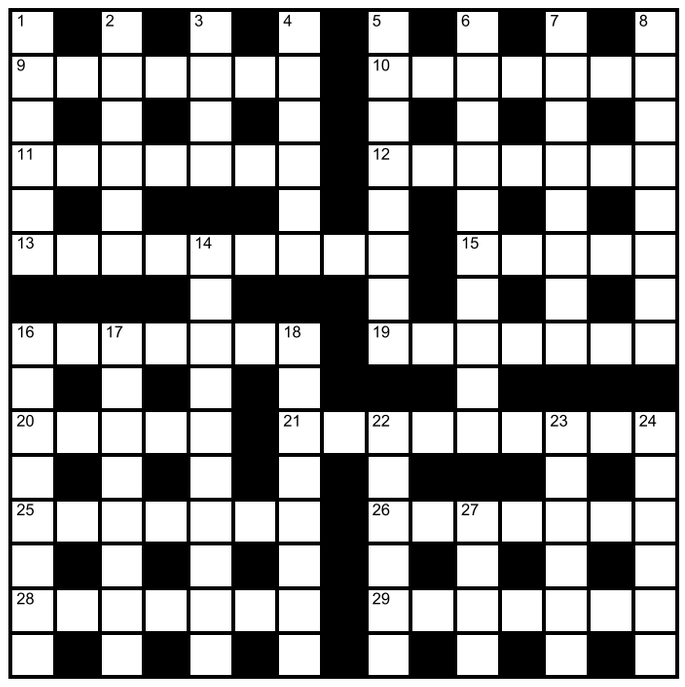
10 Born on February 8, 1974, Guy-Manuel de Homem-Christo is a French musician. He started a band with Thomas Bangalter to play indie rock. When a reviewer called them 'a ___ punky thrash', they took on the name and went on to become one of the greatest electronic music acts of all time. Which band is this that is only depicted with helmets?

A molecular biologist from Madurai, our quizmaster enjoys trivia and music, and is working on a rock ballad called 'Coffee is a Drink, Kaapi is an Emotion'. @bertyashley

Answers

1. Lift created by aircraft wings
2. Jules Verne
3. Periodic Table of Elements
4. Xerography, Xerox
5. Batman
6. John Williams
7. Jagjit Singh
8. John Grisham
9. Mohammed Azharuddin
10. Daft Punk

THE HINDU SUNDAY CROSSWORD NO. 42 (set by Afterdark)



Across

9 Master taster first had salt (7)
10 One never gets disturbed or upset (7)
11 Old graduate with nurse essentially appears rude (7)
12 Forces hurt in revolt at the outskirts of Sialkot on Sunday (7)
13 Mistress becomes quiet reportedly after boundary (9)
15 Spine showed by police officer facing ex-President (5)
16 Drinks a little short mostly (7)
19 Weight's one gram? Hospital treatment starts later today (7)
20 Flood at resort on Tanjore outskirts (5)
21 Precedents in cricket matches to keep cover (4,5)
25 Uproar among the poorest mostly at introductions (4-3)
26 Say, loser's dismal, so Randolph hugged (4-3)
28 Dish with a bit of rum and dates brought by attendant (7)
29 Award received by peer was part of an organ (7)

Down

1 Dialect found from Tampa to Islamabad (6)
2 Skilled aides reviewed in turn (6)
3 Local men essentially are naked (4)
4 Rector always receives excellent respect (6)
5 Animal skin article's small, basically teeny to the greatest extent (8)
6 In tossing coins far one makes inaudible sound (10)
7 Cadres singularly check plaster (8)
8 Again argue about animal getting estrogen replacement therapy (8)
14 New rep claimed to study preparing for medicine (10)
16 Herb is meeting Kelvin to get a legendary serpent (8)
17 Say, kettle on side, baker loses the lid (3,5)
18 Cancel class as a core student eloped at first (3-5)
22 Collector touring hospital with barber perhaps (6)
23 Address by exciting mentors; time flew (6)
24 Poem from web son downloaded first (6)
27 Say, browse about sea sport (4)

SOLUTION NO. 41

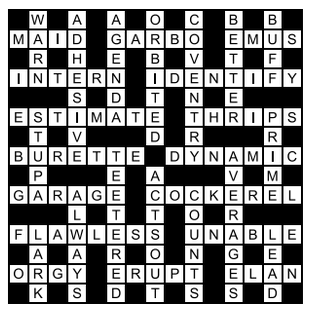


ILLUSTRATION: SREEJITH R. KUMAR

Requiem for a year that failed its own claims

Shelley Walia
shelleywalia@gmail.com

Music does not resolve anything, but it refuses erasure and insists on remembrance when forgetting is the norm

January is already through, yet the New Year arrives burdened by the unfinished violence of the last. I think of the many who lost their loved ones in Gaza, in Ukraine, in Sudan, and now civilians killed for daring to protest in Iran. To speak of Gaza or Ukraine today is to risk being framed in ways that delegitimise moral insistence, recoding it as sentimentality or partisanship. And yet insistence is precisely what this moment cries out for.

I listen to the Venetian Baroque composer Tomaso Albinoni's *Adagio*, a requiem moving slowly through ruins, carrying grief in silence and offering an ethical lesson that "grief hurried is grief denied". The music does not offer any consolation, but strikingly bears witness. In its refusal to rush past sorrow lies its devastating honesty, allowing grief to unfold at its own pace, to be felt rather than buried. It lingers, refusing the world's impatience with mourning. Gaza, above all, demands this refusal to not simply pass by its terrible destruction where the reduction of lives to numbers is submerged in the bureaucratic language of "collateral damage".

Moving, enduring

I find the music moving because it does not plead or persuade, but simply endures, an endurance that has defined the human condition over the past year and now spills into the new one. Its power lies in restraint, in the refusal of becoming a part of the spectacle. In a time when suffering is endlessly televised and yet curiously emptied of meaning, such restraint feels almost subversive.

Another composition returns imperceptibly at the threshold of the New Year. Samuel Barber's *Adagio for Strings*, written in the shadow of a world sliding toward catastrophe, has deeply accompanied moments of collective mourning for over a century. It ascends slowly, almost pleadingly, before breaking into silence. That silence matters. It acknowledges what language cannot carry. It is the pause that politics refuses to sanction.

Modern politics indeed is allergic to silence. It demands immediacy, alignment, certainty. It has little patience for mourning that does not quickly convert into justification or revenge. The tragedies that now bleed from one year into the next, Gaza foremost, but also Ukraine, Sudan, Iran, the disasters of death, displacement and hunger are processed not as moral failures but as strategic necessities, as expedient calculations of power that leave no space for ethics or pity.

And yet art remembers what politics erases. In Krzysztof Penderecki's *Threnody for the Victims of Hiroshima*, sound itself becomes anguish, shrill, fractured, almost unbearable. It is sound as pain, not sound about pain. It is not beautiful in any conventional sense, and that is precisely its honesty. Some wounds never heal into narratives.

What unites these compositions, as the New Year stumbles forward, is not despair but seriousness. They do not pretend that catastrophe can be resolved through rhetoric or managerial competence. They resist the cheerful cynicism of a world that labels devastation an inescapable complexity and moves on. In doing so, such music gives form to the historical and emotional textures of our time. The year gone by, and the one now unfolding, has been full of speech where opinions keep multiplying even as moral clarity thins. With colonisation returning in naked, unapologetic form, with empire shedding even the pretence of restraint, and fact and fiction becoming all the more indistinguishable, the future already feels bleak. In such a climate, to mourn openly, to insist on grief without qualification, itself becomes a political act. More than a requiem, this insistence draws attention to the collapse of a shared moral horizon in a world that once claimed to defend human dignity. For me, the music I hear on this cold January morning does not resolve anything. It does not tell me what comes next. But it refuses erasure. It insists on remembrance in a time organised around forgetting. Art, here, becomes not consolation but survival, a way of staying human while history repeats its worst instincts. To listen, to imagine, to remain open to grief is not withdrawal from the world but a form of ethical resistance. In staying with loss, it teaches us how not to become complicit in forgetting.

Days of the wedding cassette

Naseer Ahmed
nasirhuzain10@gmail.com

Revisiting an old wedding cassette is still one of the most exciting rituals in my home. Every time it plays, I feel myself sinking into a whirlpool of nostalgia. My parents' wedding photos and videos were simple captures of the event – unlike today, when the entire thing is staged for the camera. Back then, a photographer simply arrived, took a few unposed shots of the bride and groom, clicked random guests who instantly froze and stared straight into the lens, captured a ritual or two, photographed the long food table lined with steel buckets and banana leaves, people eating under the bright tube-lights – and that alone counted as a complete wedding album. Even the gifts from the bride's side were dutifully recorded, as if documenting every item was essential to preserving the day.

The video had its own innocent charm, a relic from a time when weddings were more ritual than performance, before Bollywood-style choreography replaced devotional music. It was filmed in pure Doordarshan documentary fashion, stitched together with three Nagore Hanifa songs looping in the background. Random transitions of trees, waterfalls, swans, and floating flowers were added to "connect" the couple – as if nature itself had turned up to bless the union. It feels unintentionally funny today, even slightly cringe, but beneath all the amusement lies a sincerity that's impossible to recreate.

And of course, these were the days of VCRs, not CDs or digital files. The wedding cassette had only one purpose: to be watched once every few years.

We were witnessing a legacy. A slice of our family's history. A portrait of our parents, untouched by filters, retakes, choreography, or aesthetics. Something raw. Something rooted. In that Doordarshan-style glare – in those shaky frames and innocent edits – lies a truth most modern, perfectly curated weddings can never replicate. It is imperfect.

But it is ours. Original. Honest. Eternal.

The missing moments on the small screen

Recalling the days when television meant just Doordarshan fare

ISTOCK/GETTY IMAGES

K. Murlidar
k.murlidar@gmail.com

Recently, I received a WhatsApp share with a picture of a boy standing near a TV with the caption "My parents had a TV like this and I remember because I was the 'remote'", and with greetings on World Television Day.

This made me go down memory lane recollecting the good old golden days of television at our home. It used to be a luxury in the 1980s and if you had a colour television, then you were a VIP of the locality for sure! Before the entry of our own TV to our drawing room, I can still remember myself standing on the street, watching through the gap of a window, the World Cup matches, *Oliyum Oliyum* or a few scenes of Tamil movies.

Sheer obsession

Televisions started entering the drawing rooms slowly during the 1980s and the sheer obsession to watch *Chitrahaar*, regional movies or cricket matches can hardly be forgotten. Similarly, serials such as *Discovery of India*, *Ramayan* and *Buniyaad* made the entire family with neighbours sit before the TV well before the show. The limited sources of entertainment in those times explain the immense popularity of Doordarshan. Our home in Thanjavur will become a movie hall on weekends, especially Sunday evenings, with diverse viewers, consisting mostly of my school friends and neighbourhood uncles and aunties, thronging our home to watch feature films. DD was telecasting regional movies in alphabetical order and it would be a long wait before a Tamil movie is telecast. This made us watch classic Bengali or Kannada movies too and till today, the habit continues. We would be looking forward for weekends as my mother would make hot *pakodas* or *bajjis* to make the experience a truly entertaining one. I remember rolling out mats for children to squat and chairs for the elderly to comfortably sit and watch *Ramayan*. I cannot forget that my mother prepared *semiya payasam* and offered as *neivedyam* on the day when *Rama Pattabhishekam* was telecast. It was all fun and joy. Similarly, I am reminded of viewers praying, eyes closed and hands folded, when the war scenes in *Ramayan* were telecast.

It seemed that television became a very prominent way to entertain the whole family, during its introduction and watching television together as a community was a unique and blissful experience.

It became a routine sit-down for us to watch these shows, while eating dinner or doing chores, all with the entire family and neighbours coming together.

Adventures with acrophobia

Climbing entailing a precipitous looking down turns into an unsettling experience

ISTOCK/GETTY IMAGES

Somnath Sarkar
somnath1955@gmail.com

Recently I declined an invitation to get to the designated 148th floor of the iconic 828-metre Burj Khalifa for a pricey panoramic view of Dubai from the 555-metre perch.

I happen to be a chronic case of acrophobia. It is accompanied by a sinking-churning feeling, with epicentre in the pit of the stomach. This phobia has touched such disconcerting heights that when people invite me to their 10th or higher floor homes, I convey my regret with whatever excuse I can latch on to.

Ascension to those levels, entailing a precipitous looking down, is an intensely unsettling experience. I first confronted the phobia as a teenager when I accompanied a visiting relative and his family to the permitted first level of Qutb Minar. From the 100-foot high balcony projection, I saw human dots moving around below. Instantly my head reeled and the stomach churned as the phobia unceremoniously staged its maiden entry into my life. I must acknowledge that a past-life regression therapist did make a sincere attempt at evicting the "unwanted guest".

Going by the success rate of PLRT in the hands of experienced therapists, the therapy should have dispelled the irrational fear permanently. Regrettably, it did not.

Days later, during a visit to a house-warming do at a friend's 20th floor flat in Kolkata, I sauntered across to the expansive balcony where a barbecue was organised. The familiar dreadful feeling was back. I felt like my head had entered a washing machine in high-spin mode.

I reasoned that in an era of specialisation, I had erred in consulting a junior therapist, competent, perhaps, to treat only lesser height phobias. Had I gone to a senior therapist, with proven "hi-rise" capabilities, the outcome may have been different.

FEEDBACK

Letters to the *Magazine* can be e-mailed separately to mag.letters@thehindu.co.in by Tuesday 3 p.m.

Cover story

Cancer patients experience significant psychological distress and suffer from conditions such as depression, anxiety, or adjustment disorders. ('Making room for the mind'; Feb. 1) By supporting mental resilience alongside medical therapy, psycho-oncology and immunotherapy enable holistic, patient-centred cancer care and better overall outcomes.
N.S. Reddy

The cover story on cancer radiated sanguinity and empowered the readers. Rather than highlighting the darkness of the disease, the article uplifted storytelling by making us feel informed and not frightened.
Beena Anil

New ways to fight cancer bring hope and relief. Doctors can now spot warning signs much earlier with smart scans and simple blood tests, often before the illness surfaces. Treatments are becoming more focused, aiming only the sick cells, which means fewer side effects and faster recovery. Gentle surgeries and improved methods to shrink tumours also ease pain and shorten hospital stays. Together, the advances are saving more lives and helping people live with dignity, turning cancer from a feared battle into one where strength and science improve the chances of survival.
O. Prasada Rao

The shift towards integrating psycho-oncology into standard cancer care in India is a vital step forward. While clinical treatment addresses the tumour, the psychological burden often remains ignored. To make this effective, hospitals must standardise distress screening and insurance providers should cover therapy costs.
M. Barathi

Art and the artist

Marina Abramović believes art exists in the present while channeling the past to imagine the future, which is what makes it timeless. ('Marina Abramović: art of endurance'; Feb. 1) This interview captures her power, cutting straight to the essence of performance art and introducing readers to its unapologetic pioneer — Marina Abramović.
S. Sundareswara Pandiyan

Symbol of courage

The article about Yogita Bhayana was an informative read. ('Yogita Bhayana: staring down darkness'; Feb. 1) Undeniably, she is a hero. Our society is becoming more dreadful and intolerant as far as women's safety is concerned. One needs to be vocal and defend against these atrocities.
Sajna Hameed

Yogita Bhayana's crusade should not go in vain. Every city needs a relentless fighter like her. If people support her, I see no reason why we shouldn't dream of a rape-free India.
T.S. Sanath Kumar

Kudos to Yogita Bhayana for bringing to light the sexual violence and atrocities that women are subjected to. It requires grit and empathy to champion others and fight for their justice. The need of the hour is to lend moral support to people like her who help create awareness in society.
Ratna Naidu

MORE ON THE WEB

www.thehindu.com/opinion/open-page

Killed for looking different
It was not just a murder; it was a failure of society
Vandana Verma

The quiet decline of repair culture
As replacement becomes the default choice, a sustainable way of living is being lost
Varun Jha

The cost of a tablet
Treatment should not leave the poor indebted for life
Rishi Kanna

Pressuring children
They have to bear the burden of parental expectations
G. Swaminathan

Contributions of up to a length of 700 words may be e-mailed to: openpage@thehindu.co.in Please provide the postal address and a brief background of the writer. The mail must certify that it is original writing, exclusive to this page. The Hindu views plagiarism as a serious offence. Given the large volume of submissions, we regret that we are unable to acknowledge receipt or entertain queries about submissions. If a piece is not published for eight weeks please consider that it is not being used. The publication of a piece on this page is not to be considered an endorsement by The Hindu of the views contained therein.

(Clockwise from far left) Inside the Beverly Hills store; Anita Dongre with her son Yash; actors Richa Moorjani, Mindy Kaling and Poorna Jaganathan at the launch; models in the Rewild collection; and the store's facade. (SPECIAL ARRANGEMENT)

TAKING INDIA TO BEVERLY HILLS

How Anita Dongre's new U.S. chapter could redraw the retail blueprint for Indian designers looking to go international

Akanksha Kamath

Just days before she turned her attention to a new flagship in Beverly Hills, Anita Dongre was in Vadodara, at the historic Laxmi Vilas Palace, preparing for the second edition of Rewild, her Fashion for Good fundraiser that brings together craft, conservation and community. Against the palace's Indo-Saracenic backdrop, models walked in contemporary silhouettes rooted in Indian textile traditions, as musicians and conservationists gathered for a January evening that reframed the fashion show as a vehicle for stewardship. (The funds are reserved for nature and wildlife conservation.) It was a reminder that even as the brand expands outwards, its centre of gravity remains firmly grounded at home.

That same sensibility now finds architectural expression on Wilshire Boulevard in Beverly Hills, where a vertical garden rises from the ground, designed by MAD Architects. Dongre's newest flagship store here opened with pomp and fanfare, courtesy Los Angeles locals and friends of the brand, including actor Poorna Jagannathan and actor-producer Mindy Kaling, as co-hosts.

Inside, a *pichwai* wall painted and embroidered by craftspeople in Rajasthan glows against handwoven furnishings and embroidered lampshades. The space, about 3,000 sq.ft., carries the House's signature language: contemporary silhouettes framed by centuries-old craft.

The store marks Dongre's fourth international location, following flagships in Mumbai, New York's Soho, and the Dubai Mall. It is also a first for an Indian designer in Beverly Hills, an address she describes as "the next step for the brand to cover this side of the world". "We were one of the first designers to open in the U.S.," she says over a call on the eve of the launch. "We started with New York and there was always a desire that after a year or two, we would have the second store in L.A. Then COVID-19 happened and things slowed down. It took us about three years to find a location that we were happy with."

Taking on the West Coast

The L.A. flagship is led by her son, Yash, who oversees international operations. "This store is retailing our bridal wear, which will be targeted largely to the South Asian diaspora," he explains. "Other than that, we have a lot of occasion wear, resort wear, and red carpet looks." Including the collection from the Rewild fundraiser. "With these lines, we are hoping to target a much wider audience, do red carpet activations and really make it an international store."

The choice of location is strategic. "When we thought of L.A., it was clear it would always be Beverly Hills," Yash says. "We want to be in global retail luxury hotspots." The decision also stems from consumer insight. "We had a lot of clients coming from California to the New York store," he notes.

The Beverly Hills opening also reflects a larger shift in how South Asian luxury brands are positioning themselves in the West. As retail strategist Liza Amlani, co-founder of the Retail Strategy Group, points out, "We're seeing an emergence of South Asian designers in the western world, especially in North America where the spending power sits." L.A., she notes, is home to a large and affluent South Asian community, as well as Persian, Arab, and mixed-heritage consumers drawn to culture-driven design. "Californians feel strongly about sustainability, circularity, clean beauty, and now we're seeing that mindset translate into fashion. Anita's brand aligns beautifully with that," Amlani says.

Experiencing the brand

Dongre's work beyond retail is equally aligned with the values of a global luxury consumer increasingly attentive to provenance, purpose and impact. For instance, pieces created by women artisans from SEWA Gujarat were integral to the Rewild collection, reinforcing the brand's long-standing commitment to sustaining livelihoods and evolving traditional skills.

Across the U.S., the luxury retail sector has been recalibrating post-pandemic. Customers are still spending, but they are doing so differently – toggling between full-price luxury, resale and off-price channels. "Consumers want to experience the brand, not just buy it," Amlani observes. "We're also seeing increased spending in resale and off-price categories [Nordstrom Rack, Fashionphile], meaning shoppers are mixing aspiration with access." It explains why brands and their physical stores today must offer an experience, not just inventory, and why a flagship like Dongre's fits that shift.

Geography and community matter

In cities like Toronto, New York and now Los Angeles, South Asian visibility has grown rapidly across media and fashion – from Diwali parties hosted by personalities such as Lilly Singh to designer pop-ups, jewellery launches and red-carpet appearances by actors like Priyanka Chopra and Deepika Padukone. "In my lifetime, I never thought I'd see so many South Asian designers, musicians and actors shaping culture in North America," Amlani says. It's this growing confidence that creates demand for brands like Dongre's to build physical spaces of their own.

Dongre's launch partners for the store, actors Kaling and Jagannathan, reflect the connection and proximity to Hollywood. "Poorna has been a brand friend for many years," Dongre says. "She's amazing with fashion. I just picked up the phone and said, 'Poorna, I'm opening', and she said, 'I'm calling my friends'."

As an Indian woman now living in London, I understand the resonance. I wore a blue Anita Dongre *lehenga* for my wedding – one of those striking pieces that make an impact and yet say I'm Indian. I've since worn it with a white shirt for several Diwali parties in London. For many women like me, her work fits the space between heritage and modern life, while embodying culture, community and legacy.

Self-funded growth

The L.A. flagship is one step towards the brand's thoughtful expansion. "Honestly, I believe in a two-year plan," says Dongre. "In the next two years, there will be no more stores. We're just going to focus on this one."

Her flagship joins a growing constellation of Indian names entering or expanding in global retail: Sabyasachi with his jewellery salon at Bergdorf Goodman and standalone New York store, Gaurav Gupta and Rahul Mishra's couture shows in Paris, Anamika Khanna's collections at Saks Fifth Avenue, each presenting a version of Indian craft recalibrated for global taste. But unlike many of these, Dongre's strategy remains mostly self-funded (while the business was previously backed by General Atlantic, her expansion today is increasingly founder-led).

For international designers, the U.S. remains the ultimate testing ground for scale. "A customer in New York shops differently from one in California or the Midwest," says Amlani. "No other country offers that kind of cross-section." In essence, if you win in the U.S., you can win anywhere. And for a brand like Anita Dongre that's historically been local-proud and global-curious, outward expansion comes with inward balance.

The writer is an independent journalist based in London, writing on fashion, luxury and lifestyle.

Dismantling the colonial frame

One of the largest presentations of ethnographic photography, DAG's new exhibition encourages visitors to question how much the colonists left out

Avantika Shankar

The history of photography in India goes hand-in-hand with developments towards the modern science of anthropology. In the mid-19th century, colonial officers, army surgeons, missionaries, and government photographers lugged heavy cameras and fragile glass plates across towns, battlefronts, and mountain passes, in an effort to 'objectively' document the people of the country – for administration and governance.

But the objectivity is questionable. Working in makeshift camps and studio tents, they photographed men, women, and children as "types": Brahmins and Bhils, traders and soldiers, frontier tribes and court performers. Under ambitious projects such as *The People of India*, which led to an eight-volume series compiled by John Forbes Watson and John William Kaye (published between 1868 and 1875), entire communities were turned into catalogue entries, their portraits paired with captions that judged character, behaviour, and social worth. The camera, marketed as neutral and objective, became one of colonialism's most powerful bureaucratic tools.

'Making a type invisible'

"Photographs by themselves don't tell you they were made with a colonial gaze," says historian Sudeshna Guha, who combed through the archives at DAG to curate an extensive exhibition of colonial-era photographs, titled *Typecasting: Photographing the Peoples of India 1855-1920*. "The typologies were created, not only by the British, but also through the information of the natives [what they shared about their caste, creed, occupation and trade]. Many photographs don't have a background; so they appear divested from the cultural plane. That typologies are a construct – ours – is what I would like visitors to get."

Running parallel to the India Art Fair, *Typecasting* brings together nearly 200 rare photographs and photographic objects, including albumen and gelatin silver prints, cabinet cards, and postcards spanning an extraordinary geographic and communitarian range. The images span across tribes, 'races' and trades, such as the Lepchas and Bhutias of the Northeast, the Afridis of Khyber Pass in the northwest, and Todas in the Nilgiris in the south, along with wealthy Parsi and Gujarati families, dancing girls, coolies, barbers and snake charmers.

At the heart of the exhibition is a rare selection of folios from *The People of India*, featuring the work of some of the best amateur photographers of the 19th century, including Benjamin Simpson, James Waterhouse, and John Burke, and also the lesser-known commercial studio Shepherd and Robertson.

"The idea is to show the power and potential of a photograph to question typology," says Guha. She points to the vignetted portraits of people from the Lepcha Bhutia tribe by Simpson in 1861-62. It was intended to be an authentic representation of the community, but was photographed in Darjeeling, and not Sikkim or Tibet.

(Clockwise from left) Group of Afredees from the Khyber Pass, Peshawur, by Charles Shepherd; Untitled (Indian Family in Singapore), by G.R. Lambert & Co.; and Group of Young Bhutias, attributed to Fred Ahrle. (COURTESY DAG)

An imprecise record

In an accompanying publication that includes essays by professors Ranu Roychoudhuri (Ahmedabad University), Suryanandini Narain (Jawaharlal Nehru University) and independent researcher Omar Khan, Guha expresses the ways in which all photographs taken at that time would have been composed, or "staged", simply as a result of the constraints of the time. In the 19th century, photography was a physically demanding and technically fragile process.

Many early photographers worked with the wet collodion method, which required glass plates to be coated, exposed, and developed while still wet, so they were forced to carry portable darkrooms, chemicals, water, and light-proof tents wherever they went. Heat and humidity regularly destabilised chemical reactions, ruined negatives, and caused emulsions to peel or crack. Long exposure times meant subjects had to remain perfectly still, producing the stiff, posed look that became typical of ethnographic images.

Despite these obvious shortfalls, the finished photographs were presented as precise scientific records, masking the messy realities of climate, improvisation, and human negotiation that shaped every image. "The camera takes whatever is placed in front of it, and does not discriminate," she adds. "So, in a way, photographs make a type invisible." Guha's hope is that, over a century after the last of these images was taken, visitors will be able to train their own critical gaze onto these images, and consider not just what they 'depict', but the ambiguities they show.

It's also worth noting that despite the problematic colonial histories from which they emerged, each of the photographs in the exhibition is striking to look at, and could potentially open up whole new realms of historical enquiry. "More than anything, I am hoping that some bright young spark will think about this and realise there's a lot more research to be done on this period," concludes Guha.

Typecasting is on view at Bikaner House, New Delhi, till February 15.

The freelance writer and playwright is based in Mumbai.